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WAR AND LITERATURE

The present time would seem to be especially opportune for a consideration of the mutual relations between literature and war. So terrible a conflict as the present one the world has never seen before, and certainly will not see again for many years to come. For Europe, and probably for America as well, the former things are passed away. A struggle so far-reaching will produce its inevitable effect upon literature. Will this be favorable or the reverse?

First, let us see what are some of the less favorable consequences of the war. One of the most lamentable is the killing off of so many young literary men. Rupert Brooke, Harold Chapin, Frank Taylor, Alan Seeger, Jean Maspero, Guy de Cassagnac, August Stramm, Walter Heyman are only a few out of a great number who have already perished; and besides these who had already begun to win fame, there must have perished many another mute, inglorious Milton. The Moloch of war has demanded the sacrifice of the best.

But not only does war rob us of a large number of writers, actual and potential; it also paralyzes the living who remain. Sir James Barrie writes a war play: *The Day* proves heavy, inert, anything but what we should expect of him. Some, like Mr. Wells and Mr. Arnold Bennett, have been chiefly engaged in journalism. They may be storing up impressions which they will some day use in enduring literature—let us hope this is the case; but at present, so far as real literature is concerned, they are silent.¹ Others have been frozen by the recrudescence of

¹ " Dans une savante étude publiée ici même [le 15 mai, 1916], et dont je ne saurais assez louer la très haute portée 'documentaire,' M. Legouis nous a entretenus des ouvrages nouveaux inspirés par le spectacle imprévu de la guerre aux maîtres les plus fameux de cette littérature [anglaise]; et force lui a été d'avouer, l'on s'en souvient, que pas un de ces maîtres, les Wells et les Kipling, les Galsworthy et les Shaw, n'avait encore rien écrit, depuis deux ans, qui fût pour ajouter sensiblement à leur ancienne gloire. C'est comme si ces écrivains notoires, trop accoutumés à l'ordre de choses au milieu duquel s'était jadis formé et développé leur talent, se fussent sentis mal à l'aise en présence d'un ordre tout nouveau, et trop différent de celui

brutality into a pessimism which is anything but good soil for literary growth. They have seen the flower of the country march away never to return; they behold ruin staring the world in the face; they look ahead to the cheerless years when widows and orphans and maimed soldiers will struggle for a wretched existence; and the tragedy is too great for expression. Nor must we forget the effects upon both writers and readers of the cheapening of human life and the resurgence of distrust and suspicion and hatred. We thought the ape and tiger were dead; but no. It takes time for the beast in us to die.

Has war any favorable effects upon literature? Possibly. Since the beginning of the present war the literary output has greatly diminished. The countries now at war are among the heaviest producers of books. In 1916, according to *Le Droit d'Auteur*, the world's annual crop of books amounted to well toward 180,000 volumes; in 1915, though the complete figures are not yet available, the number seems to have dropped to something less than 100,000.² Some regard this as a calamity; from another point of view it may be a good thing. Fewer books may mean better books; because of the greater risk involved, publishers will now think twice before accepting doubtful manuscripts. The affairs of some publishing firms may have to be readjusted or wound up; yet in the long run, good literature may not be greatly the loser. A dozen years ago Octave Uzanne complained that the French literary output was far too great. Some of our prolific writers may now have time to stop and get their breath.

dont ils se flattaient de nous avoir révélé jusqu'aux moindres secrets: tandis qu'au-dessous d'eux l'on a vu surgir d'autres hommes qui, absolument inconnus jusqu'alors, et d'ailleurs beaucoup moins fournis en fait de ressources 'professionnelles,' n'en apportaient pas moins, à ce même spectacle de la grande mêlée européenne, une vision plus fraîche et des nerfs plus solides."—M. T. de Wyzewa in *Revue des deux Mondes*, 15 juin, 1916, p. 939.

² See *Le Droit d'Auteur* for December 15, 1916. In the statistics there given no figures are available for Austria, Belgium, and Russia. The totals for Germany, Denmark, the United States, France, Great Britain, Hungary, Italy, Luxemburg, the Low Countries, and Switzerland are: in 1914, 86,473 volumes; in 1915, 73,153. Gains were made in 1915 over 1914 in Denmark, Luxemburg, the Low Countries (7 per cent), and Switzerland (nearly 18 per cent). Great Britain fell off only 872 volumes, or 7.5 per cent. The most lamentable drop was in France (54 per cent).

One recalls Mrs. Atherton's remark that if Mr. Wells "could be persuaded to stop writing for five years, disappear, forget himself (and the public), he might realize the promise of the days before he hustled out three or four books a year"; and after reading *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*, good though it be in parts, one is inclined to agree. We are not yet ready for the great war novel; and I am not at all sure that the creator of Mr. Britling, with all his versatility, is the one to write it.

The reading public, moreover, is becoming more interested in better literature, and in more serious books. Works of history and travel have a somewhat better chance than they had two years ago. The search for the causes of the war has driven us to the historians. The morbidly sexual novel is relished less than formerly. The philosophers are coming in for their share of attention; men are trying to find out what Nietzsche really said and what he really meant when he said it. In Great Britain, notwithstanding a greater falling off in the total production of books, the number of works in religion and in education issued in 1914 was larger than in 1913. In 1915 the number of works in philosophy was nearly one-third larger than in 1914, while the number of works in history increased sixty-eight per cent, or more than two-thirds. In America the number of works in poetry and the drama in 1914 was one-third larger than in 1913; and gains were made in philosophy, religion, sociology, history, and several other fields. This would seem to indicate a freer play of ideas.³

Less, too, is heard about the futurists, the cubists, the impressionists, the writers of *vers libre*, and other freaks and fanatics in the realm of letters. Readers are more anxious for common sense. The old bottles are still in good condition for the new wine.

Then there is what may be called the moral effect of the war.

³ In 1915 there was a falling off in every department except domestic economy, public affairs, and history (in which there was a gain of 30 per cent). It must be borne in mind, however, that this shrinkage may have been in part (or even largely) due to the increasing cost of paper; if so, it would not be fair to base on these figures any conclusions as to the activities of authors.

As it has progressed, we have all remarked its effects upon the characters of the combatants. As the poetry of war has been succeeded by its prose, the participants in the struggle have become sobered and chastened. Men have come to feel, what before they were only dimly or hazily aware of, that there are ideals dearer than life itself. For the vast majority of the actual combatants the war has resolved itself into a struggle for right, and justice, and democracy. And the consequent refining and the purifying of character are bound sooner or later to be reflected in literature. Surely this is as true as

"That men may rise on stepping-stones
Of their dead selves to higher things."

Surely there must be some such "far-off interest of tears." I say nothing of the price paid; this is no argument in favor of war. But with war as the bitter, ugly, hateful fact in the world as it now exists, we are entitled to draw some consolation, if we can, from the belief that as suffering deepens and enriches life, so it may purify and ennoble literature, which is the expression, the mirror of life.

Some evidence of this effect is perhaps afforded by the contrast between the sort of poetry of which we had a good deal at the beginning of the war and that which has been appearing more recently. Such verses as Chappell's *The Day*, Lissauer's *Hassengesang* and Lord Curzon's reply to it, have given place to poetry of a distinctly more noble type. It has been discovered that hatred of another country is not in itself an essential feature of loyalty to one's own. Of course it helps men in the trenches to forget their manhood and become brutal engines of destruction; but it has been a thousand times demonstrated that men do not need this impetus to acquit themselves manfully and to fight effectively and victoriously. Instead of songs of hatred, then, we are now reading narratives of personal experience, visions in the trenches, reflections on the destruction of cities and of men, the pangs of separation from loved ones, admiration for deeds of courage and heroism, as in Winifred M. Letts's *The Spires of Oxford*, which surely has not been too often quoted:—

I saw the spires of Oxford
As I was passing by,

The gray spires of Oxford
 Against a pearl-gray sky.
 My heart was with the Oxford men
 Who went abroad to die.

The years go fast in Oxford,
 The golden years and gay,
 The hoary Colleges look down
 On careless boys at play.
 But when the bugles sounded war
 They put their games away.

They left the peaceful river,
 The cricket-field, the quad,
 The shaven lawns of Oxford
 To seek a bloody sod.
 They gave their merry youth away
 For country and for God.

God rest you,—happy gentlemen,
 Who laid your good lives down,
 Who took the khaki and the gun
 Instead of cap and gown.
 God bring you to a fairer place
 Than even Oxford town.

And occasionally we get a note of the grim irony of it all, as in
 W. N. Ewer's *Five Dead Men*, with its pathetic refrain,—

I gave my life for freedom—this I know:
 For those who bade me fight had told me so.

It may be that the war will ultimately produce some great work that shall stir the world as only a few great books have hitherto done. We have sometimes said that the world is too old for another Homer or another Dante. In the light of the last three years, men are now seen to be relatively in their infancy. Far from being old and blasé, the race begins to look like an infant emerging from pinafores. If men's ability to keep out of war can be taken as a test of their intellectual growth and emotional restraint, then it may be a long time yet before we can call ourselves mature. And great literature is apt to go with maturity, at least of the individual. The great writers are always spoken of as ahead of their age; that is, as older than their contemporaries.

If this be true, then we must not look for the great book too soon. Homer did not write *The Iliad* until after the Trojan

War had become a vague racial memory, separated from his time by two or three centuries. Not until four centuries after the First Crusade came *Jerusalem Delivera*; and *The Song of Roland* dates from some two centuries after Roncesvaux. The great Napoleonic wars were half a century old before Tolstoi wrote his great epic of *War and Peace*, and another half century elapsed before Thomas Hardy produced *The Dynasts*. Tennyson was stirred by the Crimean War; yet with all his belief in the regenerating and purifying influence of war, what did he make of it? Only *The Charge of the Light Brigade*—the ballad of a blunder. How many great poems have yet been written on our Civil War? Mr. Howells has found just one—Lowell's *Commemoration Ode*. There must be time for the poet to collect himself, to forget somewhat the strain, the agony, the horror, to remember his emotion in tranquillity, to see the event as a whole in its larger relationships, with the whole creation moving toward it.

And we may at least respect the prediction already hazarded, that so far as the nations now at war are concerned, the greater literature will emanate ultimately from the defeated countries. This seems to be a part of that mysterious law of compensation which Emerson found working throughout the universe. For the effect of victory upon the mind and soul of the conqueror tends to blunt his sensibilities, to make him less sensitive to the finer things of life. Nobody doubts to-day that Germany, whatever we may think of her, is the result of the Franco-Prussian War; and no one doubts the inferiority of the literature of the empire to that of the preceding era. In Florence in 1883 Mr. Howells asked the editor of a great German literary weekly about German novelists of the day, and received this reply: "There are no longer any German novelists worthy of the name. Our new ideal has stopped all that. Militarism is our new ideal—the ideal of Duty—and it has killed our imagination. So the German novel is dead."

On the other hand, the effect of the defeat of France in 1871 was certainly chastening and sobering. At the close of the war France found herself with depleted ranks, an enormous debt, an impoverished people. Inevitably there followed years of pessimism and atheism, a tendency towards which had already be-

come evident, and which is still traceable in writers of the older school like Pierre Loti, Anatole France, Maeterlinck, Maupassant, and Eduard Rod. From this state the French passed into the remarkable religious revival seen at its best in the works of such men as Retté, Huysmans, Verlaine, Coppée, Bourget, Charles Péguy, Paul Claudel, and François Jammes—a revival but for which, it may safely be said, we should hardly have seen such splendid and determined resistance as France has made to the attacks of her enemies in the last year.

If the Central Powers are to be defeated as a result of the present struggle, will this prophecy hold true? It may be. But regarding the Germans in the light of what has transpired in these three years concerning their character and moral ideals, we must concede that here another element enters into the problem. The canker of two standards of morals, one for the state, the other for the individual, has evidently eaten deep into the national life. It is hard to see how any great literature can come out of a country where such brutalizing ideas prevail; when the Germans have purged themselves of these ideas, we may have hopes of them.

And now let us ask another large question: What has been the effect of literature upon war?

Before we answer this let us ask what in general is the relation of literature to life. Is it merely a record, a picture of what has taken place? To a large extent this is the case. But is it not also largely a projection of ideals into terms of life, a warning, an exhortation? *Ex pede Herculem*. Literature, then, shall tell us not only how men have lived and are living, but also how they are going to live in the future if present conditions prevail, and how they may live if these conditions are varied. As the work of the ablest, the keenest, the most forward of the world's thinkers, literature must be not only a record but an inspiration. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* went a long way toward defeating slavery. *The Song of Roland* at Hastings helped, who shall say how much, to give victory to the Norman banners. Homer in the schools of Hellas moulded Greek ideals of honor and patriotism and loyalty such as have never been surpassed.

Bearing all this in mind, I fear we must admit that in the

matter of war, literature has not had a greatly restraining influence. Most of us now agree that war is a gigantic evil, of which the world must soon rid itself. What has literature done to check the evil, or to show it up in its true light? There are few considerable pieces of literature in which war is depicted in any but romantic terms. After reading our Civil War literature, few would think of characterizing war as Sherman did. To nine persons out of ten, Napoleon is still a hero rather than a villain, who waded through slaughter to a throne. What historian does not, even though unconsciously, exalt the martial hero, the conqueror, the savior of his country? Once in a while along comes a Lampzus with his realistic portrayal of the horrors of war, and does the cause of literature an inestimable service by correcting false impressions. Kings and kaisers may for a time prevent the circulation of such books, but cannot permanently injure their influence. I do not plead that literature should be made a servant of morality; I contend that literature ought to be so true to life, as Shakespeare is true to life, that only one moral shall be obvious.

In Russia the poets have lately not been in accord as to the attitude they should assume. Some, we are told in *The Russian Review* for March, 1916, have urged that the present is not a time for poets to sing, and in support of their contention have pointed to the inferiority of the poetry thus far produced. Others assert that the war imposes peculiar burdens upon the poet. "The poet," declared Andreyev, several months before the overthrow of the Czar, "is the only one who can and should bring home to the masses of the Russian people the horrors of war. A powerful description of a shot from a 42-centimeter gun might produce an even more powerful impression than the shot itself. The horrible war is undermining the very substance of Russia's national life, and the men of letters, the whole intellectual army of the land, should rise, and, instead of the 'literature to Beauty,' should sing and cry about the war, ring the alarm-bells, blow the trumpet, and arouse the nation's conscience."

So, as one of the great aids to peace, there should arise a literature of war which shall treat war in all its phases, good so far

as there are any, bad as most certainly are. Let our writers depict not only the glorious departure for the battle-field, but also the agony of the wounded and dying; not alone the exultation of the soldier's bride, but also the misery of his widow and starving children; not alone the glad response of the patriotic people to the call to arms, but the secret plotting of the makers of arms and the "interventionists" to stir up strife; not alone the elation of victory, but the decades of repentance in sackcloth and ashes for the vanquished; not alone the vindication of "national honor," but the brutalizing, bestializing influences at work upon officers and men alike in the atmosphere of excessive militarism. Then men will get from the picture all they need in order to apprehend the truth. And in righteous wrath they will decree that the present war shall be the last.⁴

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⁴ In these days one can hardly be too explicit. The above words were mostly written before our country had entered into the war. They must not, therefore, be taken as meaning that the writer is, or has at any time been, opposed to American participation in the war — which we now perceive is as much *our* war as that of any other of the Allies.